

# Perspectives in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: A Medieval Transgressive Text?

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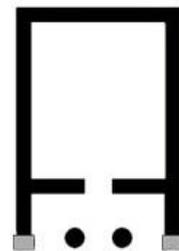
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## Perspectives in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: A Medieval Transgressive Text?

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It may be stated with a degree of confidence that, to modern literary theorists and informed readers, the work of art transcends authorial intention.<sup>1</sup> As obvious as such a statement may sound to contemporary ears, it also runs counter to medieval conceptions of art. The point is that whilst modern literary theory is based on subjectivist assumptions, ‘medieval theory proceeds from the objectivity of the form or idea.’<sup>2</sup> In his *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas compares God, as the creator of all things, to an artist,<sup>3</sup> with the idea of the artist therefore being one in which it is assumed that the artist is in control of his creation, and that he effectively imposes his will on the artistic process and product.<sup>4</sup> The neo-Platonic conception of art, also at the forefront of medieval thought and which is, moreover, reflected in the writings of Augustine, sees the work of art as the product of ideas in the mind of the artist. Art as conceived by the neo-Platonists, in being aligned to the world of ideas, therefore forms part of a higher order as opposed to the changeable material world.<sup>5</sup> It should come as no surprise then that any literary work conforming to such philosophies would not be expected to entice the reader to set himself above the author in the act of interpretation, but rather to have the reader seek the correct, or authorial, interpretation of the text.

Despite this supposed expectation, A.C. Spearing considers that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an open-ended poem characterised by relativism, which allows freedom of choice to the reader.<sup>6</sup> This is because, he argues, ‘it is not firmly placed in a perspective of absolute values.’<sup>7</sup> Such an interpretation sees *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a transgressive text, in that it makes the poem run counter to the expectations arising out of the prevailing medieval philosophies of art. Interestingly, widely diverging critical interpretations of the character of the Green Knight would seem to support such a reading of the text. In his *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study*, Spearing sums up conflicting critical interpretations of the Green Knight. John Speirs saw the Green Knight as a descendant of a nature god, whereas L.D. Benson describes the same character as a combination of the Green Man and a wodwose, or a wild man. On the other hand, Heinrich Zimmer identifies the character with death, as he interprets the knight’s green skin as that of a corpse. At diametrically opposed

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Morgan, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the idea of Righteousness* (Dublin: Colour Books Ltd, 1991), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Benziger Bros. Edition (1947) First Part, Question 45, Article 6, in DHS Priory, <<http://dhspriority.org/thomas/summa/FP/FP045.html#FPQ45OUTP1>> [accessed 22 October 2016].

<sup>4</sup> Morgan, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> A.C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 236.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

ends, B.S. Levy sees the Green Knight as the devil, whereas Hans Schnyder identifies him with Christ!<sup>8</sup>

The Green Knight, who challenges the knights of Camelot to a beheading game, is best described as an ambivalent character. Whilst represented as half a giant, he does not share the traits commonly associated with giants in medieval romance. In fact, he is well-proportioned<sup>9</sup> and his dress suggests that he belongs to a courtly culture.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, just as much as the Green Knight's courtly dress, with its gold and green, suggests courtesy and youth, his green skin, as already pointed out, may be said to recall the devil and death.<sup>11</sup> This very ambivalence, which effectively withholds authorial intention from the reader, may also be interpreted as a transgressive element, in that it entices different, even conflicting, interpretations.

It must be stated, however, that the Green Knight's ambivalence does not originate with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as it is traceable to the poem's sources and analogues. The ostensibly illogical beheading game instigated by the Green Knight at Camelot—whereby he submits to an axe strike by a knight who accepts his challenge, and who agrees to submit to a return blow by the Green Knight himself in a year's time—already had a long history by the time the *Gawain*-poet made use of it.

The first recorded instance of the beheading game is in the Middle Irish prose narrative *Bricriu's Feast*,<sup>12</sup> wherein two such texts feature. The second game in the Irish narrative is closely analogous to the beheading game in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It commences with an ugly churl who is said to have a tree trunk in his left hand and an axe in his right hand. The churl explains that he chose to challenge the men of Ulaid because they were said to surpass anyone else in their skill. However, the warrior who accepts the challenge fails to make an appearance for the return blow on the following day, after the churl survives his beheading. In the end, the hero, Cú Chulaind, accepts the renewed challenge and awaits the churl's return blow on the following day, even if he feels certain this would cost him his life. The hero's life, however, is spared. The challenge, according to the churl, proves that no warrior is comparable to Cú Chulaind.<sup>13</sup>

Just as the churl in the Irish narrative holds a tree trunk in one hand and an axe in the other, the Green Knight issues his challenge to the knights of Camelot holding a holly in one hand and an axe in the other, i.e. a symbol of Christmas festivities in one, and death in the other.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the Green Knight also brings the reputation of the challenged court, Camelot, into play, stating that Arthur's court is renowned for its pride and conquests. (*SGGK*, 309-11)

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<sup>8</sup> Spearing, p. 179.

<sup>9</sup> Morgan, pp. 69-70.

<sup>10</sup> Lines 179-99 of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Patience*, ed. by J.J. Anderson (London: Everyman Library, 1996), pp. 167-278. [Further references to this work will be given parenthetically in the main text and indicated by the abbreviation: '*SGGK*'].

<sup>11</sup> Denver Ewing Baughan, 'The Role of Morgan La Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *ELH*, 17:4 (1950), 241-51 (p. 243).

<sup>12</sup> Elisabeth Brewer, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight- Sources and Analogues*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992), p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 251-255.

<sup>14</sup> J.A. Burrow, *The Gawain-Poet* (Devon: Northcote House Publishers Ltd., 2001), p. 44.

Again, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the protagonist is not the first to accept the challenge, yet he pleads with King Arthur to take up the challenge in his stead. (*SGGK* 354-55) Moreover, both challengers recognised the respective heroes' worth. Just as the churl, who turns out to be the noble Cú Ruí son of Dáre<sup>15</sup> and therefore not a churl, states that Cú Chulaind is deserving of the champion's portion, so the Green Knight, who is in reality Sir Gawain's host at Castle Hautdesert, (*SGGK*, 2445) affirms that Sir Gawain is worth more than any other knight. (*SGGK*, 2364-5)

The ambivalence of the Green Knight is therefore inbuilt within the narrative.<sup>16</sup> Yet, it also has to be said that the *Gawain*-poet goes beyond any sources and analogues, introducing the hero's view of the challenger to the narrative once Sir Gawain reaches the Green Chapel to submit to the return blow. Sir Gawain describes the Green Chapel, which turns out to be a mound, as a place where worship would be conducted in the ways of the devil, and the Green Knight as the devil himself. (*SGGK* 2192-93) However, this view of the Green Knight is ultimately not supported by the evolution of the narrative. In fact, Sir Gawain's own perception of the Green Knight and the Green Chapel may well be the result of his fear at the prospect of death. Sir Gawain betrays this fear of the challenge when he calls on the Green Knight to answer him immediately or, as it is implicitly suggested, Sir Gawain would leave the Green Chapel once and for all. (*SGGK* 2215-16) This is confirmed by the response of the Green Knight, who rebukes Sir Gawain for his impatience.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, in the end Sir Gawain's life is spared. Hence, while the representation of the Green Knight is ambivalent, such ambivalence is at least in part the result of the hero's own biased perception. The point made here is that Sir Gawain, whilst posited at the centre of the narrative, cannot see the whole picture. Sir Gawain's misleading perception of events around him is one of the most significant innovations introduced to the beheading game theme by *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which brings to the fore the poem's Christian message. This theme therefore attests to the type of transgression to be found in the poem, a transgression that is literary rather than thematic.

However, the *Gawain*-poet does not only relate a beheading narrative; the poem combines the game with other challenges that the hero has to face, the first of which is the wilderness passage. This passage precedes Sir Gawain's temptation at Castle Hautdesert, and also follows an important passage that sets out the hero's moral code, a moral code that is literally emblazoned on his shield in the form of a pentangle, which stands for a set of virtues tested in the course of the poem.

The pentangle is said to be made up of five sets of five.<sup>18</sup> The first set stands for the five senses (*SGGK* 640) and the second for the five fingers. The five fingers may be intended to

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<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Ganz, Trans, 'Bricriu's Feast', in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, ed. by Betty Radice (London: Penguin Books, 1981), pp. 219-55 (p. 255).

<sup>16</sup> A number of concepts that I am putting forward here are similar in scope and nature to concepts that appear in the dissertation I submitted a few days prior to the completion of this article. This dissertation has been submitted to the Department of English within the Faculty of Arts of the University of Malta in connection with an M.A. by Research Degree. The title of the dissertation is 'The Development of the Heroic Theme in Medieval English Traditional Verse.'

<sup>17</sup> Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet A Critical Study*, p. 188.

<sup>18</sup> Morgan, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the idea of Righteousness*, p. 91.

refer to Psalm 143, which 'was included in the order of service for the ceremonial dubbing of a knight: [...] "Blessed be the Lord my God, who teacheth my hands to fight, and my fingers to war."'<sup>19</sup> The third set comprises the five wounds of Christ, which stand for the virtue of faith<sup>20</sup>, and the fourth set which stands for the five joys of the Blessed Virgin, inspiring Sir Gawain's fortitude. (*SGGK* 645-47)

The fifth set of the pentangle is made up of five virtues, namely:

- a) *fraunchyse*, or generosity of spirit;
- b) *felawshype*, or loyalty;
- c) *clannes*, or cleanliness, which can be externally manifested in chastity;
- d) *cortaysye*, or courtesy; and,
- e) *pitè*, which surpasses all points (*SGGK* 654-5), or piety, which shows through in Sir Gawain's religious devotions.<sup>21</sup>

The detailed description of the shield and the pentangle is part of the arming of Sir Gawain ahead of his journey in search of the Green Chapel, therefore setting out that the knight is one who stands for, and fights with reference to, his moral code. In the subsequent wilderness passage Sir Gawain and his virtues undergo their first trial, one which sees him face off against mainly fantastical enemies in a romance scenario:

'So many mervayl bi mount ther the mon fyndes,  
Hit were to tore for to telle of the tenthe dole.  
Sumwhyle with wormes he werres, and with wolves als,  
Sumwhyle with wodwos that woned in the knarres,  
Bothe with bulles and beres, and bores otherquyle,  
And etaynes that hym aneledede of the heghe felle.' (*SGGK* 718-23)

Yet, as Sir Gawain 'sleped in his yrnas' (*SGGK* 729) he is most upset by the winter cold, which points towards the spiritual nature of his trial, which calls for vigilance and preparedness as it constantly taxes the hero, who at this point of the narrative assumes the mantle of an everyman figure. After all, Sir Gawain believes that he is on a journey to meet his own death, and even if this turns out not to be the case, his entire quest eventually proves to be a spiritual one in which a reckoning is made. In this sense Sir Gawain is not at all unlike the character Everyman in the medieval morality play of the same name. In the play's opening, Death tells Everyman:

'On thee thou must take a long journey;  
Therefore thy book of count with thee thou bring,

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<sup>19</sup> Morgan, pp. 91-92.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* p. 92.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 94-98 and p. 101.

For turn again thou cannot by no way.<sup>22</sup>

In the course of the adventure in the wilderness, the poet relates that Sir Gawain would not have survived ‘Nade he ben dughty and dryye, and Dryghtyn had served.’ (*SGGK* 724) Moreover, Sir Gawain himself prays to the Blessed Virgin (*SGGK* 737) and calls on Christ’s Cross, (*SGGK* 762) which in the context of the aforementioned pentangle passage recalls the virtues of fortitude and faith. Moreover, his riding happily on the following day—Christmas day—evokes Sir Gawain’s virtue of piety and the meaning of Christmas, namely ‘redemption of the world from the misery and wretchedness of sin.’<sup>23</sup> It is therefore the virtues of the pentangle that are tested by the wilderness passage, and that take Sir Gawain out of the wilderness, just as it is the character Good Deeds who speaks on behalf of Everyman when it is time for judgement<sup>24</sup> in the aforementioned morality play.

However, the pentangle passage does not only inform the wilderness passage, but also Sir Gawain’s subsequent trial at Castle Hautdesert. The trial at the castle takes the form of three temptation scenes, the temptress being none other than the host’s wife. Lady Bercilak’s attempts at seducing Sir Gawain are framed within three hunting scenes; the hunts and the seduction scenes are structurally linked by the exchange of winnings agreement between Sir Gawain and his host, whereby the two agree to give to each other their winnings for each day. (*SGGK* 1107-10) The parallelism between the hunts and the seduction scenes, coupled with the fact that he is to stay at the castle, suggest that Sir Gawain faces difficult prospects, given that in the English medieval literary tradition hunting is often presented as an activity that keeps man away from sin.<sup>25</sup>

One important element shared by the three temptation scenes is Sir Gawain’s reputation for courtesy, which is given an amorous interpretation by his temptress. Sir Gawain’s courtesy, or *hendelayk*, is first mentioned in the first temptation scene, when Lady Bercilak claims that Sir Gawain is renowned for such a virtue. (*SGGK* 1228-29) The amorous connotations Lady Bercilak assigns to Sir Gawain’s courtesy become obvious when she points out that they are alone, and that she has ‘in this hous hym that al lykes.’ (*SGGK* 1234) In the second scene Lady Bercilak goes one step further right after Sir Gawain says that he has not asked her for a kiss out of fear of being refused. (*SGGK* 1489-93) In fact, she responds in what David Mills refers to as an almost explicit invitation to rape<sup>26</sup> by telling Sir Gawain: ‘Ye ar stif innoghe to constrayne wyth strenkthe, yif jow lykes,|Yif any were so vilanous that yow devaye wolde.’ (*SGGK* 1496-97) This time, therefore, Lady Bercilak proposes to Sir Gawain a violation of the virtue of courtesy, along with other virtues embodied in the pentangle. When this fails, Lady Bercilak pleads with Sir Gawain to be taught the art of love. (*SGGK* 1531-34) Once more, she assigns an amorous interpretation to the virtue of courtesy, claiming that:

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<sup>22</sup> Lines 103-05 of ‘Everyman’, in *Three Late Medieval Morality Plays- Mankind, Everyman, Mundus et Infans*, ed. by G. A. Lester (London: A & C Black, 1981), pp. 63-102 (p. 68).

<sup>23</sup> Morgan, p. 29.

<sup>24</sup> Lines 870-76 of ‘Everyman’, p. 100.

<sup>25</sup> Anne Rooney, ‘The hunts in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’, in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. by Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), pp. 157-64 (p. 157).

<sup>26</sup> David Mills, ‘An Analysis of the Temptation Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*’, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 67:4 (1968), 612-30 (p. 623).

'So cortayse, so knightly, as ye ar knowen oute-  
 And of all chevalry to chose, the chef thing alosed  
 Is the lel layk of luf, the lettrure of armes.' (SGGK 1511-13)

Whilst Sir Gawain does not in any way succumb in the first two temptation scenes, the third presents some difficulties. In the third scene, after having failed to seduce the hero (SGGK 1779-86) as in the first two scenes, Lady Bercilak also fails to convince Sir Gawain to give her a love token (SGGK 1801-09) or even to accept a ring from her (SGGK 1822-23). The temptress offers her green girdle which, she claims, would render Sir Gawain invulnerable:

'For quat gome so is gorde with this grene lace,  
 While he hit hade hemely halched aboute,  
 Ther is no hathel under heven tohewe hym that myght,  
 For he myght not be slayn for slyght upon erthe.' (SGGK 1851-54)

The lady evidently counts on Sir Gawain's fear of the prospective encounter with the Green Knight – a ploy which clearly pays off. In fact, at this stage of the narrative the hero effectively convinces himself that accepting the gift is the right thing to do:

'Then kest the knyght, and his come to his hert  
 Hit were a juel for the jopardé that hym jugged were,  
 When he acheved to the chapel his chek for to fech;  
 Myght he haf slypped to be unslayn, the sleght were noble.' (SGGK 1855-59)

As for the first two scenes, the third scene ends with Sir Gawain formally kissing the lady.

Similarly to the case of the presentation of the Green Knight in the poem's opening and closing, the temptation scenes have the poet play with different perspectives. Again, as in the case of the beheading game, the hero's perception of what goes on around him is not necessarily any more reliable than that of other characters. While approaching the Green Chapel Sir Gawain erroneously identifies the Green Knight as a devil who would destroy him; in the case of the third temptation scene Sir Gawain does not quite seem to perceive his temptress' ulterior motive, as he is unaware of the link between his host and the Green Knight, and between his temptation and the beheading game.

Following the second temptation scene, Sir Bercilak claims to have tested Sir Gawain twice, finding him worthy on both occasions. (SGGK 1679) The first two exchanges of winnings, in fact, involve Sir Gawain giving back the lady's formal kisses, while Sir Bercilak gives Sir Gawain the deer hunted on the first day and the boar hunted on the second. Sir Gawain has words of praise on both days, stating that he had never seen such spoils on the occasion of a deer hunt in seven years (SGGK 1381-82) and that he had never seen such a large boar. (SGGK 1630-33)

The first two exchanges therefore witness a victorious host and a victorious guest, the former asserting his hunting prowess, the latter his moral integrity. The third exchange of winnings is different, for in Sir Bercilak's own words, the outcome of his hunt is just a 'foule fox felle.' (SGGK 1944) Therefore, Sir Gawain cannot praise Sir Bercilak's yield. Moreover, this time around Sir Gawain rushes to meet his end of the bargain, betraying his unease with the situation: "I schal fyllen upon fyrst our forwarde nouthe,|That we spedly han spoken ther spared was no drynk." (SGGK 1934-35) On this occasion therefore, just as much as Sir Bercilak's reward for his efforts is an animal regarded as vermin, so are Sir Gawain's efforts in the third temptation scene compromised by his lack of faithfulness towards his host.

It is interesting that the poem has Sir Gawain go to confession later during the course of the third fitt, (SGGK, 1877-81) presumably without having revealed anything of the green girdle and the breach of the agreement with Sir Bercilak. Gerald Morgan interprets this as an illustration of Sir Gawain's complete acceptance of the lady's argument that in the circumstances the taking of the girdle was the right thing to do.<sup>27</sup> Although other interpretations of Sir Gawain's omission could and indeed have been suggested, it bears noting that the poem never reproves Sir Gawain for having purposefully left a sin undisclosed in his confession. Such an omission, if intentional, would have implied a lack of piety; yet at the end of the poem neither the Green Knight nor Sir Gawain himself, nor the context of the poem, suggest that Sir Gawain's shortcomings involved a lack of piety.

The poem's last fitt sees the Green Knight sparing Sir Gawain's life. He feints a strike twice, while the third axe strike only delivers a slight cut to Sir Gawain's neck. This outcome directly results from Sir Gawain's compliance with the terms of the exchange of winnings agreement on the first two days at the castle and of his acceptance and retention of the green girdle on the third. (SGGK 2345-59)

The beheading game as reproduced in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* therefore follows the logic of the game in similar narratives, which according to Derek Brewer requires that the life of the protagonist should be spared if he fulfils his pledge to submit to the return blow and that, indeed, he should be praised for his efforts.<sup>28</sup> However, in being linked to the exchange of winnings agreement the beheading game in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* also embraces the principle of fitting retribution, or the *contrappasso*, a principle which informs Dante's *Inferno*.<sup>29</sup> It should be emphasized that the link between the beheading game and the exchange-of-winnings agreement appears to be an innovation introduced by the *Gawain*-poet. Therefore, even if the poet follows tradition in representing a positive outcome to the beheading game, he adds a new dimension to the age-old motif, thereby overstepping or transgressing the boundaries of the genre by introducing a moral dimension that is altogether absent from known analogues, such as *Bricriu's Feast*. The poem leaves little room for doubt as to the interpretation of the retention of the green girdle, even if the Green Knight sees Sir Gawain's attempt at saving his own life as a mitigating factor. (SGGK 2368) On the other hand, Sir Gawain thoroughly evaluates his own sin, stating that it involves cowardice, in view

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<sup>27</sup> Morgan, p. 134.

<sup>28</sup> Brewer, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight- Sources and Analogues*, p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> Morgan, p. 154.

of his fear of death; covetousness, given his desire for the girdle; as well as infidelity towards his host.<sup>30</sup> The two views of Sir Gawain's sin are not mutually exclusive, for ultimately the Green Knight sees the hero's failing as one deserving of punishment, even if a slight one. Moreover, the reference to the virtues by which Sir Gawain has to some extent fallen short links up to the pentangle passage, which does not quite attest to a poem that is open-ended.

The character of Morgana La Faye, who at the end turns out to be the one who instigated Sir Bercilak's transformation into the Green Knight, (SGGK 2444-47) brings more ambivalence into the picture. The Green Knight states that Morgana's reason for sending him to Arthur's court to offer the beheading challenge is to frighten Arthur's queen to death. (SGGK 2459-62) While this explanation tallies with the hostile Morgana of French romance,<sup>31</sup> it is grossly unsatisfactory in the context of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In fact Queen Guinevere's fear is only referred to once over the course of six lines. (SGGK 470-75)

It could be argued that here, as indeed it is elsewhere, that the *Gawain*-poet plays with perspectives. Denver Ewing Baughan considers that, notwithstanding the Green Knight's claims, the Morgana of the poem is the product of a tradition that sets her out as Arthur's healer at Avalon,<sup>32</sup> and that she sent Sir Bercilak to Arthur's court so as to rid the court of its moral corruptness, thereby purifying it.<sup>33</sup>

The ambivalence or duality of Morgana La Faye is confirmed by the revelation that she is the old lady Sir Gawain had already encountered in Sir Bercilak's castle, on account of her old age (SGGK 2463) and her living in Sir Bercilak's house. (SGGK 2445-47) In the second fitt of the poem the old lady was compared and contrasted to Sir Bercilak's young wife, (SGGK 950-65) the one being representative of old age and ugliness and the other of youth and beauty. Whilst Sir Gawain is struck by the external appearance of the young lady, (SGGK 965) the narrative reveals her to be an emblem of sin, possibly even death, on account of her temptation of the hero. On the other hand, if Baughan's interpretation of Morgana La Faye is accepted, the old lady, whilst externally ugly, assumes the role of a healer who regenerates Camelot.

This interpretation is lent strength by the fact that the representation of other characters or even objects in the poem, as attested by Sir Gawain's perception of the Green Knight as the devil or his initial assessment of the acceptance of the green girdle, is built on changing perspectives, with the hero's initial perception proven wrong by the narrative. In this regard it is also worth noting that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* brings into play conflicting traditions in the characterisation of Sir Gawain himself. The placing of Sir Gawain next to Queen Guinevere in the poem's opening may well be meant to evoke the role of Sir Gawain in French romance, namely that of love-talker, lover-maker and philanderer.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, it is this reputation that seems to haunt Sir Gawain in the temptation scenes with Lady Bercilak,

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<sup>30</sup> Morgan, p. 159.

<sup>31</sup> Burrow, *The Gawain-Poet*, p. 42.

<sup>32</sup> Baughan, 'The Role of Morgana La Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', p. 251.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Spearing, *Gawain-Poet A Critical Study*, p. 198-99.

who interprets the virtue of courtesy amorously, thereby pitting this virtue against that of chastity, which is also encompassed by the pentangle passage described earlier on.

On his return to Camelot Sir Gawain encounters a court that does not see his failing as a tragic one. The court's judgement is lenient, so much so that Sir Gawain's self-imposed mark of shame—the green baldric, which is in fact the green girdle—is adopted as a mark of honour. (*SGGK* 2513-21) The Green Knight's and Camelot's assessments of Sir Gawain's adventure hinge on the assumption that Sir Gawain's excellence, in being human, is imperfect by nature. The very symbol of Sir Gawain's excellence, the pentangle, is 'geometrically imperfect, and hence fitted to represent a human excellence that is correspondingly imperfect.'<sup>35</sup>

It is worth recalling that the other poems in the same manuscript in which *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is preserved, namely Cotton Nero A.x., Art. 3,<sup>36</sup> feature, notwithstanding their considerable differences in terms of subject matter,<sup>37</sup> some interesting parallels. In fact, according to Spearing the 'central figures of *Patience* and *Pearl* are both men whose failures of moral awareness are revealed through a meeting with the supernatural; they are both would-be heroes [...] it would not be surprising if Gawain were similarly conceived.'<sup>38</sup> For instance just as Sir Gawain is frightened by the prospect of the encounter with the Green Knight once at the Green Chapel, so is Jonah afraid of being captured by the Ninevites. Whilst these fears dominate the minds of the respective protagonists,<sup>39</sup> they ultimately prove unfounded.

The question to be asked at this point is whether the mentioned factors create a text that is transgressive in the sense of consigning meaning and interpretation to the reader. It has already been argued that, all things considered, the poem leaves little room for doubt as to the interpretation of Sir Gawain's withholding of the green girdle. While it is, to some extent, debateable as to what extent Sir Gawain erred in retaining the girdle, keeping it is nonetheless 'wrong' in the context of the narrative, as attested by the application of the law of the *contrappasso*.

Similarly, the ambivalence of the poem's characters does not obfuscate the truth propounded by the narrative, namely that even the best of men remain fallible and imperfect.<sup>40</sup> The poet therefore introduces perspectives and points of view into material inherited from different traditions, ultimately producing a work that is as Christian in outlook and significance as the other poems in the same manuscript. As the Jonah of *Patience* learns that he cannot counter God's will, so does Sir Gawain, following an angry outburst as the Green Knight reveals his failing and accepts that his excellence is flawed:

'Bot in syngne of my surfet I schal se hit ofte

When I ride in renoun, remorde to myselven

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<sup>35</sup> Morgan, p. 105.

<sup>36</sup> Spearing, *Gawain-Poet A Critical Study*, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>40</sup> Morgan, p. 59.

The faut and the fayntyse of the flesche crabbed,  
How tender hit is to entyse teches of fylthe.' (SGGK 2433-36)

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with its ambivalent features and perspectives, is therefore not a transgressive text in the conventional thematic sense, as the pentangle passage provides a fixed point around which to interpret the unfolding narrative. Conversely, the creative utilisation and combination of diverse elements by the *Gawain*-poet does point towards a poem that is many ways innovative, and hardly what the reader would expect out of a poem relying on traditional and folkloric sources.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is ultimately a blend of the old and the new, or the traditional on the one hand, and the then contemporary and fashionable on the other. It is written in alliterative metre, thereby pointing to a tradition that may be traced back to earlier Anglo-Saxon poetry, yet its alliterating lines are placed in a stanzaic arrangement rounded off by five rhymed lines,<sup>41</sup> which reflects other contemporary influences on the poet. Moreover, in some ways the poem looks back to the heroism characteristic of the Old English alliterative tradition, as the hero believes that he is literally walking towards his own death. Sir Gawain's wilful self-sacrifice recalls the fighting spirit displayed by Byrhtnoth and his men in *The Battle of Maldon*, where all the retainers praised by the poet have laid down their lives in what Joseph Harris considers as being comparable to a male suttee,<sup>42</sup> a trait that the same critic traces back to the Germanic tribes described by Tacitus in his *Germania*, where it is stated that surviving one's chief is shameful.<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, Sir Gawain's approach to his self-sacrifice sets him apart from the Anglo-Saxon heroic tradition. When Beowulf prepares himself for his third and final monster fight, which will see him face off against a dragon, he boasts of his reputation. He claims that as a young man:

'Heold mec on hæfde Hreðel cyning,  
Geaf me sinc ond symbel, sibbe gemunde;  
Næs ic him to life laðra owihte  
Beorn in burgum þonne his bearna hwylc,  
Herebeald ond Hæðcyn, oððe Hygelac min.'<sup>44</sup>

(King Hrethel kept and maintained me, gave me treasure and banquet, remembering our relationship; I was no more hated by him as a warrior in the strongholds during his lifetime, than any of his sons: Herebeald and Haethcyn, or my Hygelac.)

<sup>41</sup> T. Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1977), p. 33.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Harris, 'Love and Death in the Mannerbund: An Essay with Special Reference to the Bjarkamal and The Battle of Maldon' in *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period*, ed. by Helen Damico and John Leyerle (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University, 1993), pp. 77-114 (p. 101).

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>44</sup> Lines 2430-34 of Michael Swanton Trans., *Beowulf Text & Facing Translation*, ed. By Michael Swanton, Revised Edn. (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.150. [The bracketed translation is lifted from the abovementioned edition].

Beowulf also boasts of his past achievements, stating that his lord never had to seek the services of mercenaries:

‘Ic him þa maðmas, þe he me sealde,  
Geald æt guðe, swa me gifeðe wæs,  
Leohtan sweorde; he me lond forgeaf,  
Eard, eðelwyn. Naes him ænig þearf  
þæt he to Gifðum oððe to Gar-Denum  
Oððe in Swiorice secean þurfe  
Wyrstan wigfreca, weorðe gecypan.’<sup>45</sup>

(As it was granted me, I repaid with my bright sword in the battle the treasures he bestowed on me; he gave me estate, dwelling, delight in homeland. There was no need, not any cause, for him to seek out to hire for a price a worse fighting-man among the Gifthas or among the Spear-Danes or in the Swedish kingdom.)

In contrast, when Sir Gawain offers himself up for the Green Knight’s challenge in King Arthur’s stead he only claims that: ‘I am the wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest,| And lest lur of my lyf, quo laytes the sothe.’ (SGGK 354-55) In other words, Sir Gawain offers himself up by claiming that his life is of the least worth and consequence, and on that account worth risking. This display of humility, genuine or otherwise, is characteristic of a romance in which courtesy plays a central role in the characterisation of the hero.<sup>46</sup> This stance, however, is alien to Anglo-Saxon poetry, where the boast, like loyalty unto death or fate,<sup>47</sup> is a central component of the presentation of the heroic. It must be noted, however, that the display of the virtue of courtesy is typical of late medieval verse romances, as for *Ywain and Gawain*, which sees the two protagonists confront each other in a duel without knowing one other’s identity, which duel is however interrupted mid-way as the sun sets, making it too dark to fight.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, once the identity of the combatants is revealed, Sir Ywain states that had he known who his rival was, ‘Than had here no batel bene.’<sup>49</sup> Each of the two combatants claims that the victory belongs to his rival, in what may be seen as the ultimate display of courtesy and humility. Sir Gawain claims that had the fight continued he would have ‘gone to ground,’<sup>50</sup> whilst Sir Ywain relates that ‘I am overcumen in this batayl.’<sup>51</sup> Sir Gawain’s humility therefore conforms to the literary expectations pertaining to the romance genre, even if it conflicts with the notions of heroism arising from the alliterative tradition.

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<sup>45</sup> Lines 2490-96 of Michael Swanton Trans., p. 152. [The bracketed translation is lifted from the abovementioned edition].

<sup>46</sup> Spearing, *Gawain-Poet A Critical Study*, p. 173.

<sup>47</sup> Mark. C. Amodio, *The Anglo-Saxon Literature Handbook* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), p. 138.

<sup>48</sup> Lines 3610-13 of ‘Ywain and Gawain’, in *Middle English Romances*, ed. by Stephen H. A. Shepherd (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995), p. 75-173 (p. 163).

<sup>49</sup> Line 3652 of ‘Ywain and Gawain’, p. 164.

<sup>50</sup> Line 3698 of ‘Ywain and Gawain’, p. 165.

<sup>51</sup> Line 3706 of ‘Ywain and Gawain’, p. 165.

Once again, just as in its metrical system, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* adopts traditional elements which are utilised simultaneously with more contemporary influences. Interestingly, while making use of a narrative ultimately derived from Celtic tradition, which could have reached the poet through fashionable French sources, as illustrated by the theme of Morgana's hostility to Arthur<sup>52</sup> or the fact that the beheading game is also to be found in continuations of Chrétien de Troyes' unfinished *Perceval*,<sup>53</sup> the poet claims that he has heard the story told in town.<sup>54</sup> This aligns *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with traditional poetry, which frequently appeals to oral tradition, as attested by the fact that in *Beowulf* it is a *scop*, an oral poet, who relates the Creation Hymn that angers Grendel,<sup>55</sup> whilst it is again a *scop* who entertains Hrothgar's and Beowulf's men following the hero's victory over the same monster.<sup>56</sup>

Hence, even though *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is at least partly indebted to the norms and conventions of English traditional poetry and, at least to a degree, to its conception of heroism, the poem proceeds to set forth a different kind of heroism. In fact, the conception of heroism to be found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* does not quite conform to the heroism attested in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Anglo-Saxon heroic poems either involve a tragic-elegiac ending, as for *Beowulf* or *The Battle of Maldon*, or one characterised by glory, as in the case of *The Dream of the Rood* or *Judith*. On the other hand, the heroism of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is typically romance in the sense of not being tragic; at the same time, it is profoundly Christian in the recognition of its failings. In this sense Sir Gawain's quest is more easily comparable to that of an Everyman.

Once Sir Gawain is informed of Lady Bercilak's deception in offering him the green girdle, he laments biblical figures deceived by women, (*SGGK* 2411-21) to whom, by inference, he relates his own experience. Irrespective of the weight that may be given by different readers to Sir Gawain's misogynistic tirade, what is truly significant is that the protagonist ultimately accepts that he is at fault, and that his error of judgement, as explained earlier, led to a sin that was punished by the Green Knight with a slight cut to the neck.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* may therefore be said to transcend the boundaries of traditional poetry, in particular by offering a different kind of heroism, as already suggested. Simultaneously, however, Sir Gawain's brand of heroism also oversteps, or transgresses, the boundaries of the typical romance, even if Sir Gawain's humility is typical of the genre. The poem achieves this through its use (perhaps even exploitation) of elements drawn from different traditions and conventions. In this regard, the combination of the beheading game and exchange of winnings agreement effectively links up the virtues of the pentangle to Sir Gawain's quest, as the outcome of the beheading game becomes entirely dependent on the protagonist's compliance with his moral code.

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<sup>52</sup> Burrow, *The Gawain-Poet*, p. 42.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>54</sup> T. Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival*, p. 78.

<sup>55</sup> Lines 86-98 of Michael Swanton Trans., p. 38.

<sup>56</sup> Lines 1063-159 of Michael Swanton Trans., pp. 84-88.

At the same time, the ambivalence of the Green Knight and Morgana obfuscates the hero-villain dichotomy that appears to inform Sir Gawain's experience right up until the end of the narrative. In fact, the hero's expectations, including his anticipation of death at the hands of the Green Knight, are not fulfilled. Moreover, as already pointed out, the external judgements of Sir Gawain's behaviour during the course of his adventure, judgements expressed by the Green Knight and the Court at Camelot, are lenient.

The end result is that the poem's multiple perspectives end up deceiving the hero, further to frustrating his expectations; it may also be argued that the poem similarly frustrates the reader's expectations. It is this, perhaps more than anything else, that makes *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* a transgressive poem and a transgressive romance. In offering a profound examination of conscience and guilt, coupled with human excellence and fallibility, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* definitely sets itself apart from the average romance. The poem therefore transgresses by overstepping the boundaries of genre; however, it does so in the service of an ideology that is anything but transgressive. Sir Gawain's theme of a human excellence that is flawed is ultimately a reflection of prevalent Christian thought, which the poem promotes and advocates not only in the overtly moral pentangle passage, but throughout the entire narrative. This creative combination of tradition and transgression in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is undoubtedly one of its many features that makes it one of the great works of the English literary tradition.

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